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SUBJECT: FIRST LADY PROMOTES EDUCATION AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT DURING KUWAIT VISIT

**¶11. (U) Summary:** First Lady Laura Bush visited Kuwait October 24-25 as part of her regional trip to highlight education, breast cancer awareness, women's issues, and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). At a diwaniyya (traditional discussion salon) hosted by Higher Education Undersecretary Dr. Rasha Al-Sabah, she shared experiences with women leaders, including a number of candidates from the 2006 parliamentary and municipal council elections, the first in which women were allowed to vote and run for office. Mrs. Bush then attended a recruitment event for the USG-funded English Access Microscholarship program, where she heard from Kuwaiti student participants who learned about American culture and democratic values while improving their English. Mrs. Bush also met Amir Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al Sabah and visited U.S. troops stationed in Kuwait. Mrs. Bush was accompanied throughout her program by Education Minister Nouriya Al-Sabih. The trip received extensive positive media coverage. End Summary.

Engaging Women's Activists

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**¶12. (U)** First Lady Laura Bush visited Kuwait October 24-25 as part of her regional trip to highlight education, breast cancer awareness, women's issues, and the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). She began her Kuwait program with an event at the diwaniyya of Higher Education Undersecretary Dr. Rasha Al-Sabah. Dr. Rasha, the first person in Kuwait to open a mixed-gender diwaniyya, hosted 17 prominent women activists in the political and social arenas, including Minister of Education Nouriya al-Sabih, former Minister of Health Ma'souma al-Mubarak (the first female minister in Kuwait), four candidates from municipal and parliamentary elections in 2006, as well as professors, government officials, activists, and journalists.

**¶13. (SBU)** The event started with a 15-minute documentary film by Kuwaiti Director and Producer Walid Al-Awadhi chronicling the lives of three women candidates in the 2006 elections, the first in which women were allowed to vote and run for Parliament. Dr. Rasha began the discussion by asking the former candidates about their experiences and lessons learned from the last elections. Some women, especially the former candidates, suggested that Kuwait should institute a quota to ensure women's election to Parliament. They argued that it would be hard for a woman to win an election without a quota because in Kuwaiti culture women are rarely in leadership positions. They admitted, however, that quotas do not have much support in Parliament and would be very difficult to pass. Former candidate Aisha Al-Reshaid suggested that when political parties eventually get recognition in Kuwait, they should be required to have a set percentage of women members in order to qualify. (Note: Currently political parties are not recognized in Kuwait, so candidates run on individual agendas and platforms. End

Note.) Membership quota for women in political parties would be an easier sell than a quota in Parliament, she argued.

¶4. (SBU) Arab Open University Professor Dr. Nada Al-Mutawa contended that Kuwaiti perceptions and values have to be changed before women can get elected to Parliament. She said Kuwaitis, even Kuwaiti women, are not ready to vote for a woman. The prevailing perception in society is that women are not as qualified as men to govern. Al-Mutawa said more needs to be done in schools and colleges to change this perception. Speaking on next steps leading up to the election, former Minister Ma'souma Al-Mubarak said that women have to be more organized, noting that some women candidates missed the deadlines and were disqualified from running in the last elections. Women candidates also must court the media in a more constructive manner. Some other women added that female candidates should look to male candidates and learn from them how to run a campaign. Former candidate Laila Al-Rashed said women candidates need to work with the Kuwaiti populace and Kuwaiti youth to gain popular support. To close the session, Mrs. Bush shared her experiences on the campaign trail and offered advice to the women on future campaigns.

¶5. (SBU) Following Mrs. Bush's departure, the women continued the discussion over lunch. Dr. Kafia Ramadan, the host of "Cross Roads," a popular television program on women's and children's issues, suggested that they should continue this discussion on her television program. The women plan on organizing a televised roundtable on politics and women on Dr. Kafia's program in the next few weeks.

Fostering American Values Through Education

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¶6. (U) Mrs. Bush then joined Education Minister Al-Sabih at a recruitment event for the USG-funded English Access Microscholarship program at a Ministry of Education training facility. This State Department program seeks to teach the English language and American values to less-advantaged Kuwaitis through experiential learning. Three students shared their experiences in the program with a crowded hall of journalists and Kuwaiti English teachers. The students talked about their participation in the program in Kuwait as well as in summer camps in the United States, where they met students from other countries, improved their English, and learned about American-style participatory democracy.

¶7. (U) In addition to providing a forum for the First Lady to interact with Kuwait youth, another purpose of the event was to expose Kuwaiti English teachers to the English Access Microscholarship program so they could identify students who would be good candidates to participate in the future. Mrs. Bush's presence and engagement provided a powerful boost to this important program for spreading democratic values, American culture, and English language skills.

Amir Meeting

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¶8. (SBU) Mrs. Bush paid a visit to Amir Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al Sabah, who had assembled the top leadership of the country for the occasion, including the Crown Prince, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister, and Minister of Amiri Diwan Affairs. Mrs. Bush briefed the Amir on her visit in the region as well as the activities she had undertaken in Kuwait. The Amir expressed openness to further partnership with the U.S. on education and health issues.

Rallying the Troops

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¶9. (U) On October 25, Mrs. Bush went to Ali Al-Salem Air Force base to spend time with many of the U.S. military

personnel stationed in Kuwait or transiting Kuwait to or from Iraq. She thanked them for their service and urged them to continue to represent their country with honor. She also noted the continuing partnership of Kuwait and the U.S., pointing out that Ali Al-Salem is a Kuwaiti base and is the first place where Kuwaiti and U.S. flags flew together.

Media

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**¶10. (U)** Mrs. Bush's trip received extensive coverage by the local and international media. The microscholarship event and troop visit were open to the press. The women's event and a courtesy call to Amir Shaykh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al Sabah were closed to the press, but photo sprays of the events featured prominently in the Arabic and English media. The coverage was positive; it portrayed the First Lady -- and the United States -- as interested in issues of human development.

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